



The Poet and the Petitioner: Two Black Women in Harvard's Early History

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The Poet and the Petitioner

Two Black Women in Harvard's Early History

Margot Minardi

On the eve of the American Revolution, Harvard College was a tumultuous place. The widespread social and political unrest of the Revolutionary era fused with students' youthful exuberance and indignation, resulting in a strange combination of principled protest and sheer silliness. In 1768, amid colonial clashes with the British over the crown's taxes on imported goods, seniors in the College voted to stop drinking tea, while others insisted on using American-made paper.¹ A few years later, still another group of independent-minded Harvardians boycotted tutor Stephen Hall's Greek classes on the lofty grounds that "wee don't chuse to spend any more of our time in the study of Greek then wee should be willing to throw away."²

Given such antics, Harvard's young men were in need of a stern lecture on the perils of moral dissipation. In 1773, they got their due in the form of thirty verse lines directed "To the University of Cambridge, in New-England."* The poem cautioned students to focus their school years on bettering themselves that they might attain salvation:

Improve your privileges while they stay,

Ye pupils, and each hour redeem, that bears

* The entire poem may be found at the end of this chapter.

Or good or bad report of you to heav'n.

Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul,

By you be shunn'd, . . .³

Ever since the Puritan migration to Massachusetts 150 years earlier, exhortations like this one had frequently come forth from the pulpits and presses of the Bay Colony. But this version was unique in that its author was neither William Bradford nor John Winthrop, neither Increase Mather nor Jonathan Edwards. Instead, these lines came from the pen of someone who was young, female, and a slave: the African-born poet Phillis Wheatley.

For most of her brief life, Wheatley was an acknowledged rarity in the world she inhabited. In 1761, when John and Susanna Wheatley selected their servant girl from the cargo of the slave ship *Phillis*, recently arrived in Boston Harbor, there were close to 5,000 blacks already living in Massachusetts, most of them slaves. Though people of African descent never amounted to more than 2.2 percent of the Bay Colony's population, slavery as an institution was significant enough and the size of the black population large enough to have attracted the concern of the commonwealth's most noted leaders.⁴ Among the first was the Reverend Cotton Mather, Harvard class of 1678, New England's archetypal Puritan cleric. In his 1706 pamphlet *The Negro Christianized*, Mather urged masters to teach their slaves scripture and guide them in worship. He also appealed to slaveowners' pragmatism by claiming that Christianization made slaves more obedient. To aid masters in fulfilling their moral duty to educate their slaves in religion, Mather provided a version of the Lord's Prayer specially paraphrased for blacks so that it

could “be brought down unto some of their Capacities.” He also published two catechisms, a three-question one “for the Negroes of a Smaller Capacity” and a lengthier one “for the Negroes of a bigger Capacity.”⁵

The small, sickly 7- or 8-year-old girl whom John Wheatley purchased as a personal servant for his aging wife turned out to be “of a bigger Capacity” than Cotton Mather--or most colonial Anglo-Americans--had imagined an African could be. As her earliest biographer tells it, when Phillis was still young enough to be losing her baby teeth, she was “frequently seen endeavoring to make letters upon the wall with a piece of chalk or charcoal.”⁶ Heartened by such precociousness, the Wheatleys’ 18-year-old daughter Mary soon started to teach the child how to read and write. Years later, Phillis’s master proudly recounted how quick a learner the girl had been:

Without any Assistance from School Education, and by only what she was taught in the Family, she, in sixteen Months Time from her Arrival, attained the English Language, to which she was an utter Stranger before, to such a Degree, as to read any, the most difficult Parts of the Sacred Writings, to the great Astonishment of all who heard her.⁷

A great astonishment, indeed. Phillis read not only the Bible, but also contemporary English poets (Alexander Pope was a favorite). A keen interest in the classics led her to study Latin in order to better understand the ancient bards. The slave girl’s immersion in poetry prompted her to try her hand at it herself, starting when she was as young as 12. Phillis Wheatley wrote the first draft of “To the University of Cambridge” when she was no older than 14.⁸

By any measure, the course of Wheatley's education was unusual. Still, literate girls in colonial New England often learned to read and write with little or no "Assistance from School Education." Just what kind of education was proper for young ladies was a subject of much debate in eighteenth-century Anglo-America, for it was widely believed that learning made women dangerously and distastefully masculine.⁹ "You need not be told how much female Education is neglected, nor how fashionable it has been to ridicule Female learning," future first lady Abigail Adams lamented to her husband John in 1778.¹⁰ Most of the concern about female education in early America centered around white girls, especially those from well-to-do families, as has the subsequent historical scholarship on the subject.¹¹ Opportunities for blacks to secure formal education were rare in the eighteenth century, although a few missionary-run schools--including a short-lived one headed by Cotton Mather--did exist.¹² Mather's propagandizing notwithstanding, a primary barrier to the education of slaves was owners' fear that literacy would lead to disobedience. One knowledge-hungry Boston slave woman named Chloe Spear (a contemporary of Phillis Wheatley) hired a local schoolmistress to give her reading lessons. But Spear's clandestine schooling ended when her master discovered her with a book and beat her on the grounds that "it made negroes saucy to know how to read."¹³

In spite of the cultural taboos against educating women and blacks, Phillis Wheatley did not simply learn how to read; she also became conversant in the underpinnings of eighteenth-century Anglo-American culture, including classical history and mythology, republican political ideology, and, most important, evangelical religion.

Susanna Wheatley, a woman of deep personal piety and active involvement in church and mission work, devoted herself to introducing her young charge to Christianity. “To the University of Cambridge” shows how well Phillis learned those lessons. In the eight middle lines of the poem, she elegantly summarized the Passion story that grounded Christian belief, imploring her readers to visualize Christ’s crucifixion. Beyond inspiring theological subjects for her slave girl’s poems, Susanna’s religiosity brought Phillis into a network of reform-minded evangelicals on both sides of the Atlantic. Several wealthy and well-connected members of that circle helped launch Phillis’s brief literary career, which would climax in 1773.¹⁴

In the summer of that year, with the publication of several poems in English and American periodicals already behind her, Phillis Wheatley crossed the Atlantic to meet her patrons and look into putting together a book. While the 20-year-old poet was in England garnering the admiration of everyone from the Earl of Dartmouth to Benjamin Franklin, commencement exercises were underway at Harvard College. The festivities that year included a “forensic dispute” between Theodore Parsons and Eliphalet Pearson (both A.B. 1773, A.M. 1776) on the question of “the legality of enslaving the Africans.” Taking the abolitionist side, Pearson noted that “stupidity is by no means the natural characteristic of these people.”¹⁵ As if to corroborate that cautious statement in support of African intellectual prowess, later that summer Phillis Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, including “To the University of Cambridge, in New-England,” came off the London presses. At the front of the book was a note “to the Publick,” assuring readers that the accompanying poems had indeed been written by “a

young Negro Girl,” born an “uncultivated Barbarian” but currently “under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave.” “She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and thought qualified to write [the poems],” the statement proclaimed, lest readers worry they were buying into a literary sham. The signatories to this preface were 18 respected men of Massachusetts, including the colonial governor, his lieutenant-governor, a future state governor, seven ministers, and John Hancock, one of the most famous signers of the Declaration of Independence. Fourteen of those 18 powerful men were graduates of Harvard.¹⁶

This, then, was Phillis Wheatley’s world. In it, relationships of dependence and patriarchy—endorsed in literature like Mather’s *Negro Christianized*—linked slaves to masters, women to men, and children to adults. Formal educational institutions were closed to those who happened to be female or black. And the men whose voices mattered most were by and large men who had attended Harvard College. Not, perhaps, the most receptive environment for a young black slave woman to tell white male college students how to lead their lives. Phillis Wheatley simply could not help herself: “While an intrinsic ardor prompts to write, / The muses promise to assist my pen,” she admitted at the beginning of her poem. Then she turned quickly to her own story:

`Twas not long since I left my native shore
The land of errors, and *Egyptain* [sic] gloom:
Father of mercy, `twas thy gracious hand
Brought me in safety from those dark abodes.

Lines like these cause some modern readers to cringe and others to look for ways to explain away Wheatley's apparent complacency toward her kidnapping and dismissiveness toward the land of her birth.¹⁷ One response is to read this passage not as literal autobiography but as a metaphor for the conversion experience.¹⁸ Still, a simple conflation of the voyage from Africa to America with the journey from paganism to Christianity conceals the violence at the core of slavery and the slave trade. A more nuanced reading requires close attention to the dynamics between speaker and audience.

The transplantation-as-conversion reading of the poem is compelling because it acknowledges Wheatley's religious faith as genuine and profound, not simply the by-product of pressure to "assimilate."¹⁹ Wheatley's primary intent in the poem was to draw contrasts between sin and redemption. She launched that theological effort in the opening autobiographical lines, with a few bold strokes ("Father of mercy," "thy gracious hand") drawing attention to her own experience of God's saving power in the face of human suffering. The second section of the poem continued to highlight Christianity's stark and nearly paradoxical contrasts. One line asked readers to "See [Jesus] with hands out-streht upon the cross"; in the next, Wheatley turned abruptly from the pain and sorrow of the crucifixion to Christ's transcendent and "immense compassion." A few lines later, she juxtaposed the indignity of Jesus's suffering with the glory of humanity's consequent salvation: "He deign'd to die that they might rise again."

Wheatley's insertion of autobiographical detail into the poem's theological substance set up a different kind of contrast, calling attention to the distinct circumstances of her own life and those of the young men to whom she directed her verse. Wheatley

made no attempt to conceal her identity from her Harvard audience. She presented herself as a native of Africa and a slave, shrouded in the “*Egyptain* gloom” that contrasted sharply with the light that filled the students’ minds.²⁰

Students, to you `tis giv’n to scan the heights
Above, to traverse ethereal space,
And mark the systems of revolving worlds.
Still more, ye sons of science ye receive
The blissful news by messengers from heav’n,
How *Jesus*’ blood for your redemption flows.

Twelve years before this poem’s publication, while an earlier class of Harvard boys was metaphorically traversing that marvelous “ethereal space,” the girl who would become Phillis Wheatley was traveling the nightmarish yet all too real Middle Passage. While this poem’s juxtaposition of Wheatley’s past with her audience’s privilege includes nary a note of self-pity, it is hard to miss an envious tinge in the longings of a bright young woman denied the formal opportunity “to scan the heights Above.”

The sole consolation for Wheatley the believer was that the two sets of contrasts her poem invoked--sinner and saved, black woman and white man--were not analogous. The blood of Christ flowed not only for privileged young men at Cambridge, but also for her; redemption was available not only to those with the best education that the colonies could offer, but also to those who had to rely on their own wits and resources to make their way in a hostile world. If by all outward considerations Phillis Wheatley was

inferior to the people she addressed, in the eyes of God she was their equal. As such, she was entitled to end her poem with one last exhortation:

Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg.
 Ye blooming plants of human race divine,
 An *Ethiop* tells you `tis your greatest foe;
 Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,
 And in immense perdition sinks the soul.

The students whom Wheatley called “blooming plants” were barely younger than she, if not older. Ever intent on drawing attention to the unusual relationship between speaker and audience, she was careful to identify herself as an African again in the final lines. Surely the gory solemnity of her “*Ethiop*’s” warnings about pain and perdition rivaled the gloomiest sermons of New England’s greatest fire-and-brimstone preachers. Yet as frightening as the “deadly serpent” is, these lines evoke another, more subtle but no less powerful image: an African woman addressing a captivated white male audience, using *their* language and belief system to express *her* own sense of self and rightness.

Singular as that image may seem, it emerges again only a few years later in the history of Massachusetts. On February 15, 1783, the state legislature (known as the General Court) received a petition on behalf of a 70-year-old woman called “Belinda, an Affrican.” Before elaborating Belinda’s request, the petition narrated her life story. It described an idyllic childhood on a verdant West African riverbank, cut short by the horrors of the slave trade. Life in Africa “would have yielded [young Belinda] the most compleat felicity, had not her mind received early impressions of the cruelty of men,

whose faces were like the moon, and whose Bows and Arrows were like the thunder and the lightning of the Clouds.” When Belinda was only about 11, those men “ravished [her] from the bosom of her Country, from the arms of her friends,--while the advanced age of her Parents, rendering them unfit for servitude, cruelly seperated [*sic*] her from them forever!” More nightmares awaited: the “excruciating torments” of the slave ship’s long journey, ending in a land where Belinda discovered that “her doom was Slavery, from which death alone was to emancipate her.” There she toiled 50 years in “ignoble servitude” until the colonies rebelled and her master, a Tory, fled to England. Finally, with the war drawing to a close, her master dead, and a lifetime of unpaid work behind her, Belinda was left with scant means of financial support. Poverty motivated her to turn to the General Court. Her master’s property having been confiscated by Massachusetts when he went into political exile, Belinda wanted the legislators to grant her money from his estate so that she could provide for herself and her sickly daughter. The legislators quickly acceded, ordering that an annual allowance of £15 12s be set aside for Belinda from the estate of her former owner.²¹

Despite the superficial similarities they share--both African-born women brought to eighteenth-century Massachusetts as slaves--Belinda and Phillis Wheatley apparently form a study in contrasts. Scholars today can go to Harvard’s Houghton Library to view an autographed first edition of Wheatley’s compositions and to decipher the words of one poem written in her own hand. Visitors to the Massachusetts Archives, however, will find that an “X” scratched at the bottom of her petition is the only writing certainly attributable to Belinda herself. That mark in place of a signature indicates that Belinda

could not write; chances are she did not know how to read either. Whoever transcribed the petition for her likely had a hand in composing it as well, for the florid and sentimentalized prose must have come from someone well versed in eighteenth-century literary forms. Of these two women, who came to Massachusetts as slaves, one was a prodigy, the other illiterate, yet their two documents, the poem and the petition, served similar purposes. They got the men of Harvard College and the General Court--two of the oldest and most important secular institutions in Massachusetts--to pay attention, if only for a few minutes, to the thoughts and experiences of black women.

By laying claim to a portion of her master's Massachusetts estate, and by seeking recourse through the government, Belinda proved that she had a stake in America. In a roundabout way, she had a stake, too, in Harvard. Belinda had been a slave to Isaac Royall, Jr., the heir to an Antiguan sugar fortune and a longtime resident of a lavish estate in Medford, Massachusetts. Throughout the eighteenth century, the Royalls were Medford's richest family, owning more slaves than any other household in town.²² Though Isaac Royall and his immediate family fled the colonies shortly after the Battle of Lexington in 1775, his fondness for his old haunts--Medford, Charlestown, Cambridge--persisted even in exile. When Royall died in 1781, he left a number of bequests to friends back in Massachusetts, as well as gifts to support Medford's church and school. One of his most generous bequests was to Harvard. Though Royall himself was not an alumnus, prior to the Revolution he had served the College as an overseer, and he had contributed money for the restoration of the library and laboratory following the Harvard Hall fire of 1764.²³ In his will, Royall left over two thousand acres of land in the towns

of Granby and Royalston “to be appropriated toward the endowing of a Professor of Laws in said College, or a Professor of Physick and Anatomy, whichever the said overseers and corporation shall judge best for the benefit of said College.”²⁴

Harvard’s governing boards decided in favor of creating a chair in law, though it was not until 1815 that the Royall Professorship actually came into being.²⁵ Isaac Parker, the first Royall Professor (1815-1827), was also Harvard’s first professor of law. Once it was established in 1817, the Law School borrowed the image on its official seal (three sheaves of wheat) from the Royall family coat of arms.²⁶ That gesture was a nod to the fact that Harvard Law School’s very existence stemmed from Isaac Royall’s generosity with his American lands. But the same will that created the Harvard professorship featured other allocations as well. To his “beloved son-in-law” Royall left “my Negro Boy Joseph and my Negro Girl Priscilla,” while a “Negro Girl Barsheba and her Sister Nanny” were to go to Royall’s daughter and “her heirs forever.” Then Royall added, “I do also give unto my said daughter my Negro Woman Belinda in case she does not choose her freedom; if she does choose her freedom, [she is] to have it, provided she get security that she shall not be a charge to the town of Medford.”²⁷

Royall’s will left Belinda something that was not really his to give, save for the fact that he had denied her of it for so long. All evidence suggests that Belinda opted for freedom rather than continued bondage to a Royall heir, but her decision posed a dilemma that modern-day observers can easily overlook.²⁸ However meager their status, slaves in eighteenth-century New England could at least claim a recognized social position. The relationship between master and slave (like those between husband and

wife, and parent and child) was hierarchical, to be sure, and could turn coercive and even violent. But New England society acknowledged certain obligations that masters had to fulfill on behalf of their servants and slaves.²⁹ Chief among these was basic material support. Once freed, a former slave was expected to be financially independent, which was difficult in the rocky postwar economy, even for a white person who did not have to worry about race prejudice.³⁰ When she petitioned the legislature in 1783, two years after Royall's death and eight years after his flight to England, perhaps the economic uncertainties of freedom had taken their toll on Belinda. Or maybe by that point she simply felt ready to claim what she saw as her due.

Were it not for Belinda and her petition, it might be possible to separate the two strands of Isaac Royall's will and the two sides of the man himself. On the one hand, he was a magnanimous benefactor who transcended political differences to support the New England institutions he loved; on the other, he was a slaveowner who held on to his human chattel even as black and white New Englanders were intensifying their demands for emancipation. But Belinda's petition draws attention to the fact that the money Royall donated to Harvard was money he had not paid the people whose labor had helped amass his wealth from the beginning. The point is not that Harvard was built by slave labor. Such an extrapolation from Belinda's story alone would overstate both Royall's importance to Harvard and one woman's role in a complex economic system--though a fuller accounting of Harvard's connections to slavery and the slave trade would indeed be revealing. What Belinda does confirm is the inextricability of Harvard's long history from the political currents, economic institutions, and social structures of the world

surrounding it. Her petition is a reminder that abundance and opportunity do not necessarily translate to equity and justice: “What did it avail her,” the petition asked rhetorically, “that the walls of her Lord [i.e., her master] were hung with splendor . . . while she, by the Laws of the Land, is denied the enjoyment of one morsel of that immense wealth, apart whereof hath been accumulated by her own industry, and the whole augmented by her servitude.” Some two centuries later, how to distribute nearly immeasurable resources in an equitable way remains the primary challenge facing both Harvard and the country whose history is so tightly intertwined with the university’s own.

The institution that attracted Wheatley’s poetry and Royall’s philanthropy would go on to become arguably the most renowned university in the world. In contrast, the lives of Belinda and Phillis Wheatley ended at best obscurely and at worst tragically. Despite her triumph before the Massachusetts legislature in 1783, within a few years Belinda had stopped receiving her allowance. In 1787, she complained to the General Court, which promised to resume its annual payment to her from Isaac Royall’s estate. The state finally sold the Royall property in 1805, by which time Belinda had most likely died.³¹ If more is known about Wheatley’s final years, the tale is hardly more satisfying. Freed shortly after the publication of her first book, in 1778 she wed John Peters, a free black man variously described as a respectable Bostonian and a dissolute businessman. In any case, Peters developed financial problems in the later years of the war, and his wife’s abortive writing career could not support the family. Though she circulated a proposal for a second book of poetry (under the name Phillis Peters), the Revolution had ruptured Wheatley’s Anglo-American network of supporters. While she continued to

publish individual poems in local periodicals, she never found a printer for the new collection. Always in precarious health, Phillis Wheatley Peters followed her last surviving child to the grave in December 1784. She was 31.³²

What place do people like Phillis Wheatley and Belinda have in Harvard's history? Efforts to "diversify" history sometimes search out dark-skinned and female faces to position among the scores of white male portraits that illustrate the College's centuries-old narrative. But there is something jarring about that image--not simply because we are unaccustomed to seeing women and people of color on the walls of the Faculty Club or University Hall, but because the contributions Wheatley and Belinda made to Harvard's history are so far outside the roles played by the distinguished faculty, alumni, and administrators whose images have long graced the university's most sacred spaces. Writing these two women into the school's history is not really a matter of inclusion, because in their time both were categorically excluded from Harvard as well as from the social space that Harvard students and alumni occupied. Instead, comprehending Phillis Wheatley and Belinda as part of Harvard's history requires careful consideration of the relationship between Harvard and the world around it. On the one hand, Phillis Wheatley's poem "To the University of Cambridge" invoked a Harvard that existed apart from the world--the kind of place worthy of a poet's loftiest religious and moral exhortations. By inserting herself into the poem, Wheatley reminded her readers that such an idealized space did not exist, at least not for everyone. From within Harvard's gates, Wheatley's poem and biography prompt us to ask: Who has been excluded from this place that has welcomed us? Turning to Belinda's plea for a share in

the wealth she helped to create, we might wonder whose hard work has enabled this institution to thrive.

In the end, the threads that bind these women to Harvard's history and to each other are admittedly thin--but surprisingly strong. What ties them together is perhaps best exemplified in the statute that established the Royall Professorship of Law. Written in 1815, those guidelines specified that the Royall Professor's ultimate purpose was to help students "become useful and distinguished supporters of our free system of government, as well as able and honorable advocates of the rights of the citizen."³³

Consider Belinda, one-time slave of Harvard's benefactor Isaac Royall, who once in 1783 and again in 1787 brought a plea to her government insisting that her rights be respected. And consider Phillis Wheatley, poet to Harvard and to the wider world, who in a verse addressed to King George's secretary of state explained that her love of American liberty stemmed from her experience of American slavery.³⁴ If a deep appreciation for human freedom is what a Harvard education entails, then surely these two women do belong amid all those distinguished alumni.

To the University of Cambridge, in New-England

Phillis Wheatley

WHILE an intrinsic ardor prompts to write,
The muses promise to assist my pen;
'Twas not long since I left my native shore
The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom:
Father of mercy, 'twas thy gracious hand
Brought me in safety from those dark abodes.

Students, to you 'tis giv'n to scan the heights
Above, to traverse the ethereal space,
And mark the systems of revolving worlds.
Still more, ye sons of science ye receive
The blissful news by messengers from heav'n,
How Jesus' blood for your redemption flows.
See him with hands out-stretcht upon the cross;
Immense compassion in his bosom glows;
He hears revilers, nor resents their scorn:
What matchless mercy in the Son of God!
When the whole human race by sin had fall'n,

He deign'd to die that they might rise again,
And share with him in the sublimest skies,
Life without death, and glory without end.

Improve your privileges while they stay,
Ye pupils, and each hour redeem, that bears
Or good or bad report of you to heav'n.
Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul,
By you be shunn'd, nor once remit your guard;
Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg.
Ye blooming plants of human race devine,
An Ethiop tells you 'tis your greatest foe;
Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,
And in immense perdition sinks the soul.

Phillis Wheatley, "To the University of Cambridge, in New-England," in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London, 1773), 15-16.

Notes

1. Samuel Eliot Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard 1636-1936* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1946), 133.
2. Quoted in Morison, *Three Centuries*, 135. In quoting here and elsewhere, I retain the spelling and capitalization of the sources.
3. Phillis Wheatley, "To the University of Cambridge, in New-England," in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London, 1773), 15-16. William H. Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings* (New York: Garland, 1984), includes a complete facsimile of the first edition of Wheatley's *Poems*.
4. William D. Piersen, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 168; Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942; reprint, with a preface by Benjamin Quarles, New York: Atheneum, 1968), 81.
5. Cotton Mather, *The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist that Good Work, the Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity* (Boston, 1706), 34-40. Mather's pamphlet was published some sixty years before Phillis Wheatley was "Christianized." The responses to Wheatley's accomplishments suggest that her contemporaries had no higher expectations for the intellectual potential of Africans than Mather had decades before; see, for example, the original London review of Wheatley's book, reprinted in William H. Robinson, ed., *Critical Essays on Phillis Wheatley* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982), 30-31. On white Anglo-Americans' beliefs about black intellectual inferiority, see Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 187-90, 304-8.

6. *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and a Slave* (Boston, 1834).

The *Memoir* was written by Margaretta Matilda Odell and is accessible in facsimile in Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings*, 431.

7. From a letter signed by John Wheatley and printed in the front matter of Phillis Wheatley, *Poems*, n.p.

8. Phillis Wheatley's year of birth is usually estimated as either 1753 or 1754. This account of Wheatley's education is based on Julian D. Mason, Jr., introduction to *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, rev. and enl. ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 3-5, and Carretta, introduction to *Complete Writings*, xiii-xiv. A useful biography is Robinson, "On Phillis Wheatley and Her Boston," in *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings*, 3-69.

9. A person's educational opportunities in eighteenth-century New England were not circumscribed merely by gender and race, but also by class. Working-class and slave women had no hope of maintaining the pretense of feminine delicacy to which elite women aspired. Though it is not about education per se, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Sheep in the Parlor, Wheels on the Common: Pastoralism and Poverty in Eighteenth-Century Boston," in *Inequality in Early America*, ed. Carla Gardina Pestana and Sharon V. Salinger (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1999), 182-200, illustrates the class lines I have in mind—those distinctions that sent some young women to spinning factories and others to embroidery schools. Although enslavement would seem to correspond with low class status, Wheatley's class position was surprisingly ambiguous. Susanna Wheatley apparently treated Phillis as something between a daughter and a cherished household pet: "[Phillis] was not devoted to menial occupations, as was at first intended; nor was she allowed to associate with the other domestics of the family, who were of her own color and condition, but was kept constantly about the person of her mistress." Oddell, *Memoir*, facsimile in Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings*, 431.

10. Quoted in Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 191.

11. See, for example, Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 189-231. A number of sources attempt to quantify literacy rates for New England women around this period; see Joel Perlmann and Dennis Shirley, "When Did New England Women Acquire Literacy?" *William & Mary Quarterly* 48 (1991): 50-67; Gloria L. Main, "An Inquiry into When and Why Women Learned to Write in Colonial New England," *Journal of Social History* 24 (1991): 579-89.
12. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19-22.
13. A Lady of Boston [Mary Webb?], *Memoir of Mrs. Chloe Spear, a Native of Africa, Who Was Enslaved in Childhood, and Died in Boston* (Boston, 1832), 22-26.
14. On Wheatley's evangelical support network, see David Grimsted, "Anglo-American Racism and Phillis Wheatley's 'Sable Veil,' 'Length'ned Chain,' and 'Knitted Heart,'" in *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 344-70, and James A. Rawley, "The World of Phillis Wheatley," *New England Quarterly* 50 (1977): 666-77.
15. Theodore Parsons and Eliphalet Pearson, "A Forensic Dispute on the Legality of Enslaving the Africans, Held at the Public Commencement in Cambridge, New-England," in *Blacks at Harvard: A Documentary History of African-American Experience at Harvard and Radcliffe*, ed. Werner Sollors, Caldwell Titcomb, and Thomas A. Underwood (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 17.
16. "Phillis Wheatley," in Sollors, Titcomb, and Underwood, eds., *Blacks at Harvard*, 9.

17. The most recent of the essays collected in Robinson, *Critical Essays*, reflect responses to Wheatley's poetry that range from ambivalent to hostile; for examples of the latter, see the selections by Angelene Jamison and Terrence Collins.
18. See the reading of Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa to America" in Marsha Watson, "A Classic Case: Phillis Wheatley and Her Poetry," *Early American Literature* 31 (1996): 122-23.
19. On African Americans and religion in New England generally, see Piersen, *Black Yankees*, 65-73; Erik R. Seeman, "'Justise Must Take Plase': Three African Americans Speak of Religion in Eighteenth-Century New England," *William and Mary Quarterly* 56 (1999): 395-406.
20. Noting that "Ethiopia" and "Gambia" are Wheatley's more familiar terms for her native land, Grimsted argues that the reference to Egypt in this poem is not synecdoche for Africa but instead an allusion to the Biblical land of slavery ("Anglo-American Racism and Phillis Wheatley," 357).
21. Massachusetts Archives, 239, 12. There are several published variants of Belinda's petition. The most accessible (and tolerably accurate) transcription of the original text is in *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Vincent Carretta (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 142-43.

22. See Royall's entry in the 1771 Massachusetts tax inventory, originally published as Bettye Pruitt, ed., *The Massachusetts Tax Valuation List of 1771* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1978). I used the online version in fall 1999; URL: <http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~hist1618/masstax/masstax.html>. Also see "A Medford Slave Roll," *Medford Historical Register* 27 (1914): 48. Biographies of Isaac Royall, Jr., and his family include James H. Stark, *The Loyalists of Massachusetts and the Other Side of the American Revolution* (1910; rpt., Clifton, N.J.: Augustus M. Kelley, 1972), 290-94; Edward Doubleday Harris, "The New England Royalls," *New England Historical Genealogical Register* 39 (1885): 348-58; Gladys N. Hoover, *The Elegant Royalls of Colonial New England* (New York: Vantage Press, 1974).
23. Hoover, *Elegant Royalls*, 65.
24. Royall will; Josiah Quincy, *The History of Harvard University*, 2 vols. (1840; New York: Arno Press, 1977), 1:319.
25. William Bentinck-Smith and Elizabeth Stouffer, *Harvard University History of Named Chairs*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1995), 397. The delay stemmed from the fact that like other loyalist estates, Isaac Royall's property was in bureaucratic limbo for some years after the war.
26. "Gallery: A Royall Find," *Harvard Law Bulletin* (Summer 2001); also viewable at http://www.law.harvard.edu/alumni/bulletin/2001/summer/gallery_main.html.
27. Royall will. I have added punctuation to the manuscript text to ease reading.

28. Nowhere does the language of the petition suggest that Belinda was a slave to a Royall heir in February 1783. Furthermore--and probably not coincidentally--by the time Belinda brought her petition to the legislature, public opinion had turned sharply against slavery. Many historians believe that several court cases decided in 1783 brought a de facto end to slavery, though there was no statutory abolition. See Timothy H. Breen, "Making History: The Force of Public Opinion and the Last Years of Slavery in Massachusetts," in *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America*, ed. Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, and Fredrika J. Teute (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 67-95; Robert M. Spector, "The Quock Walker Cases (1781-1783)--Slavery, Its Abolition, and Negro Citizenship in Early Massachusetts," *Journal of Negro History* 53 (1968): 12-32.
29. Greene, *Negro in Colonial New England*, 218-34; Piersen, *Black Yankees*, 25-36; for a broader discussion of social relations in early New England, see Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England* (New York; Harper and Row, 1966).
30. Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 101-24; Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press), 84-110.
31. Sidney Kaplan and Emma Nogrady Kaplan, *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution*, rev. ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 244, 291; *Acts and Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* (Boston, 1893), 816.
32. Robinson, "On Phillis Wheatley and Her Boston," 53-65.
33. Quoted in Bentinck-Smith and Stouffer, *History of Named Chairs*, 397.

34. Wheatley, "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North America, &c." in *Poems*, 73-75.